

TASTINGS

Eric Asimov

Syrah Seeks Its Own Identity

FOR years, the production of Rhone-style wines in California was limited to a small band of true believers like Randall Grahm, right, of Bonny Doon Vineyards, who were generally considered either visionaries or eccentrics. No matter how much they touted the virtues of Rhone grapes, though, it is fair to say that 10 years ago, nobody foresaw the explosion of California syrahs, made from the signature grape of the northern Rhone Valley.

In 1992, fewer than a thousand acres in California were planted with syrah, according to the Wine Institute, a trade association. By 2000, more than 12,000 acres of syrah were planted, and that number is surely rising. More than a few people have called syrah the next merlot. Unfortunately, that may be a problem.

Merlot was the soaring success that fueled the 1990's return to red wine, becoming so popular that it spawned a fashionable turning-up-of-noses at all things merlot. And not without reason, for a lot of insipid merlot flows every year.

What price popularity? Syrah, whether a dramatic Hermitage or an unruly Australian fruit bomb, has unmistakable aromas and flavors. Yet as California has climbed onto the syrah bandwagon, many wines are produced that bear no resemblance at all to



Terrence McCarthy for The New York Times

syrah. Some of them are cloaked in sweet oaky flavors while others fall into an undistinguished category of reds without any character.

The good news is that many appealing bottles are out there, too, including some excellent values. Both Cline and Fetzer produce \$10 bottles that show distinct, spicy syrah character. Prices rise steeply from there, with selections of increasing complexity at \$20, \$30 and \$40.

Clearly syrah from California has a lot of potential. But wine-makers need to keep one thing in mind: syrah is not the next merlot.

- GARY FARRELL, RUSSIAN RIVER VALLEY 1998** \$43  
Dark, peppery and very pure.

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- TRUCHARD, CARNEROS 1998** \$38  
Well balanced, with complex aromas and a long finish.

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- ANDREW MURRAY VINEYARDS, CENTRAL COAST, TOUS LES JOURS 2000** \$20  
Ripe, round and full of flavor.

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- JAFFURS, SANTA BARBARA COUNTY, BIEN NACIDO VINEYARD 1998** \$33  
Big, round, rich and concentrated.

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- THE OJAI VINEYARD, CALIFORNIA 1998** \$29  
Smoky and peppery, with bite and depth.

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- BONNY DOON, CALIFORNIA 2000** \$23  
Like syrah perfume, spicy, meaty and smoky.

Listed in order of preference. Prices are those paid in wine shops in the New York region.